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## Review of Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India

This book makes important contributions to the study of gender variance, sexuality, and South Asian cultures. It was awarded the Ruth Benedict Prize, given by the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists, and contains a forward written by the sexologist John Money. Nanda's focus is the hijras, effeminate or androgynous males who do not fulfill a standard man's role. She bases her book on several years of fieldwork in an unnamed city in southern India, where she studied a hijra community of about two hundred persons. She also worked in Bombay, which is a center of hijra culture.

Nanda defines hijras as occupying an alternative gender role, distinct from either men or women. She draws comparisons with the American Indian berdache, the xanith of Oman, and the mahu in Tahiti. In contrast, she points out, the [transsexual](#) role in Western culture is not accepted as a fully recognized gender. This non-acceptance, she argues, is due to a lack of religious sanction and an "unyielding Western commitment to a dichotomous gender system" (p. 137), which expects all "normal" persons to conform to one of only two gender roles. Western ideology, uncomfortable with ambiguity, strives to resolve in-between categories.

Hindu ideology not only accommodates the reality of ambiguity and diversity among different personality types, but also conceptualizes androgynous persons as special sacred beings. Hindu mythology makes frequent reference to combined man/woman beings. The cognition of hijras as religious figures, as neither men nor women, provides them with social respect and an institutional character. They are seen as representatives of the Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata, which gives them ritual power. Not just tolerating contradiction, but actively embracing it, Hindus believe that hijras have powers to bless heterosexual marriages so that they will be fertile, and infant males so that they will grow up to become masculine men.

Nanda, a professor at John Jay College, corrects many inaccuracies that anthropologists have written about hijras. First, she points out, they are not morphological hermaphrodites, but were androgynous in character from early childhood and voluntarily joined a hijra community during their adolescence. Second, they are not forced to undergo a surgical operation to remove their penis and testicles, though many of them do this by their own wish. Third, most hijras are sexually active with men, being the insertee in anal intercourse.

Some gain their livelihood through prostituting themselves to masculine males, while others marry a man and live together as husband and wife. Indian society traditionally did not see such pairings as "homosexual," since hijras were not considered to be the same gender as their masculine partners. Hijras are not defined as "men," because they have no desire to engage in masculine labor and activities, they do not wish to have sex with women, and they do not want to father children. Conversely, hijras are not seen as "women," because even though they may engage in women's occupations, they do not menstruate and cannot give birth. The book's striking photographs show hijras dressed in women's clothing, and wearing feminine hairstyles and jewelry. Yet, at the same time, Indian people recognize that hijras are not actually women. They are not-men/not-women.

Due to the Western colonial influence, which condemns gender variance and homosexuality,

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the status of hijras in modern Indian society has declined. Among Westernized Indians, hijras' presence at weddings and baptismal ceremonials is only barely tolerated. Hijras' temples are not given adequate financial support, and many hijras suffer employment discrimination. As a result, prostitution is often the only occupation open to them. Nanda's study unfortunately does not address the impact of the spread of the AIDS epidemic. Recent reports indicate that AIDS infection is quite prevalent among both male and female prostitutes in India. The fact that vaginal or anal intercourse is now considered the only proper form of sexual interaction in India is unfortunate, especially considering the popularity of oral sex, interfemoral sex, and other less dangerous forms of erotic interaction in pre-colonial Asia. For many, the imposition of Western notions of "normal" sexuality will literally lead to death.

Though her psychoanalytic interpretation is problematic, Nanda's study is an important addition to the growing literature of life histories. The book includes four hijras' detailed personal narratives, which contribute to recent trends in feminist anthropology emphasizing life stories. Nanda rightly recognizes the need for scholars to acknowledge individual variation, to understand the gendered perspectives of non-Western peoples in their own words. This book avoids the pitfall of many ethnographies which present only a generalized "culture" while lacking a presentation of real peoples' lives.

Nanda agrees with this reviewer's thesis, presented in *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Beacon 1986), that religion is the crucial factor in the acceptance of homosexuality and gender variance. Nanda concludes that alternative gender roles will be socially accepted when the religious ideology of that culture offers (1) a specific explanation for such difference, (2) formalized traditions in ritual, (3) a recognition that there are many different paths to personal fulfillment, enlightenment or salvation, and (4) the idea that gender-variant persons cannot resist following their own true nature, and are fated to be the way they are. The implications here are important for a cross-cultural understanding of homophobia, and what must be done for it to be overcome. It is not enough for a religion to be "tolerant" of gender diversity and sexual variation; it must also provide specific recognition for such diversity. By showing the social advantages to be gained by an appreciation for diversity, Nanda's study deserves a wide reading.

*Review of Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India. By Serena Nanda.*  
*Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990.*  
*Reviewed by Walter L. Williams, in American Ethnologist 1992.*  
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